

DUAL-USE CONTAINER AND METHODS OF REUSING SAME

CROSS REFERENCE TO RELATED APPLICATIONS

[0001] This application claims the benefit of U.S. Provisional Application Serial No. 60/535,728 filed January 9, 2004, the complete subject matter of which is hereby incorporated by reference in its entirety.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

[0002] This invention relates generally to product packaging, and, more particularly, to product packaging having independent use apart from packaging the product.

[0003] Often, product packaging serves little purpose to a consumer after the product is removed from the packaging. Product packaging, therefore, is ordinarily discarded by consumers. Accordingly, a great deal of waste is attributable to product packaging. Some product packaging, such as, for example, shoe boxes, may be used for other purposes after footwear has been removed from the boxes, although at least a significant portion of shoe boxes are immediately discarded by consumers.

[0004] Conventionally, footwear has been packaged in cardboard shoe boxes, and the shoe boxes include a rectangular base for holding footwear and a removable lid having downwardly depending sides which are received over the side walls of the base. The cardboard is relatively rigid, which allows multiple boxes to be stacked upon one another in a store or retail outlet display shelf or storage area. The lid is not fastened to the base but simply rests upon it so that the footwear may be readily accessed for inspection or a trial fit with a prospective purchaser.

[0005] Because of their sturdy construction, shoe boxes have sometimes been used as stackable storage boxes and organizers for papers and a host of other items by children and adults. Cardboard shoe boxes, however, were not designed for this type of use, and if they are handled regularly, they easily wear out. Also, because the lid of a shoe box is not fastened or otherwise secured to the base, contents in the box may be inadvertently exposed or spilled from the box as it is handled. While the lid may be taped to the sides of the base to avoid this problem, applying tape to the lid can be inconvenient, and removal of the tape tends to tear the sides of the base and/or the lid, thereby accelerating its demise. Furthermore, conventional shoe boxes typically lack a carrying handle and are therefore inconvenient to transport from place to place.

[0006] On another note, innovative product packaging often positively affects the desirability of a product to consumers. Footwear, for example, has been sold in cardboard boxes for such a long time that it is believed that the public has grown weary of them. For footwear manufacturers, conventional shoe packaging in cardboard boxes presents little opportunity to distinguish their products from other manufacturers.

[0007] It would be desirable to provide alternative product packaging which avoids these and other disadvantages for products such as footwear.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE INVENTION

[0008] According to an exemplary embodiment, a dual-use product package is provided. The package comprises a non-food product, a non-rigid base defining a cavity holding the non-food product, the non-rigid base being adapted to contain food products once the non-food product is removed from the cavity, a cover configured to close the cavity; and a closure member fastening the cover to the base.

[0009] Optionally, the base is soft-sided, and the closure member comprises a zipper mechanism located at or near a top edge of the base. The cover may be integrally formed with the base, and the cover may be folded over the base in a closed

position. The cavity is adapted for use as a lunchbox after the product is unpacked, and the package may include an expandable section configured to hold another non-food product different from the non-food product in the cavity. The package may be convertible into a duffel bag.

[0010] According to another exemplary embodiment, a footwear package comprises a support surface and a plurality of soft side walls extending from the support surface and defining a cavity for holding footwear above the support surface. At least one of the side walls comprises a flap folded over the remaining side walls to define a cover over the cavity, and a zipper is provided for selectively coupling and uncoupling the flap and the remaining side walls.

[0011] According to another aspect of the invention, a method of reusing a footwear package having a base defining a cavity, footwear in the cavity, a cover enclosing the footwear in the cavity, and a zipper engaging the base to the cover is provided. The method comprises unpacking the footwear from the package, and packing at least one lunch item in the package.

[0012] In another aspect of the invention, a method of reusing a footwear package is provided. The method comprises packaging footwear in a lunchbox.

[0013] In still another aspect of the invention, a method for selling a non-food item in combination with a dual-use container, is provided. The method comprises providing a dual-use container having a storage cavity configured to hold one of a predetermined non-food item and a food item, packing a non-food item in the cavity; and presenting the dual-use container with the non-food item packed therein at a point of purchase, wherein a purchaser of the dual use container with the non-food item is able to remove the non-food item and repack the dual use container with a food item.

[0014] In yet another exemplary embodiment, a method for selling a non-food item in combination with a dual-use container is provided. The method

comprises providing a dual-use container having a storage cavity configured to hold separately a non-food item and a food item one at a time, packing a non-food item in the cavity, presenting the dual-use container in combination with the non-food item packed therein at a point of purchase, and configuring the dual use container to be reusable such that a purchaser of the dual use container in combination with the non-food item is able to remove the non-food item without damaging or destroying the dual-use container and repack the dual-use container with a food item.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

[0015] Figure 1 is a perspective view of a footwear package according to an exemplary embodiment of the invention.

[0016] Figure 2 is a perspective view of the footwear package shown in Figure 1 opened and ready for use.

[0017] Figure 3 is a top plan view of the package shown in Figure 2 packed with footwear.

[0018] Figure 4 is a top plan view of the package shown in Figures 1 and 2 packed with lunch items.

[0019] Figure 5 is a side view of another embodiment of a footwear package in accordance with an exemplary embodiment of the invention.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE INVENTION

[0020] Figure 1 is a perspective view of a dual-use product package 10 according to an exemplary embodiment of the invention which may be used to package a non-food product and a food product for transportation and storage therein. As used herein, the terms “food product” or “food item” refer not only to edible food and beverage items, but also complementary items commonly used in conjunction therewith when

eating such food and beverage items, including but not limited to beverage holders (e.g., a thermos container, glass, cup or can) and eating utensils, plates and flatware, napkins, salt and pepper shakers, condiments, food warmers, cooling blocks or ice- packs, etc used to prepare, preserve, and aid in the consumption and presentation of edible foods. The food products also include prepackaged food such as LUNCHABLES® packaged meal combinations of Kraft Foods Holdings, Inc., prepackaged juice products, sippy cups, baby bottles and the like.

[0021] The terms “non-food product” or “food item” as used herein includes any and all items which are not food products or food items, including but not limited to footwear, books, magazines and periodicals, clothing related items (e.g., shirts, gloves, socks, hats and stocking caps), toy related items (e.g., toys, dolls, cars, action figures, crayons and coloring books), game-related items (e.g., cards, board games, video games, and game accessories), sports-related items (e.g., balls, gloves, caps, posters and trading cards), entertainment-related items (e.g., music, compact discs, cassettes, dvd’s, movies, and multimedia products), and infant care-related items (e.g., diapers, formulas, lotion and the like).

[0022] As will be explained below, the package 10, in addition to capably packaging non-food products for point of purchase displays and sale, the package 10 is designed for other purposes than non-food product storage or transportation. As such, the package 10 is believed to be desirable to consumers apart from the associated product and presents distinctive packaging options that may present a welcome change to weary consumers in product areas typically presented for sale in traditional paper or cardboard packaging.

[0023] While in one embodiment, the package 10 is well suited for packaging of a non-food product, as described below, the description hereinbelow is set forth as only one example of potential product packaging which may benefit from the inventive concepts described below. The description herein is therefore set forth for

illustrative purposes only, and the invention is not intended to be restricted to any particular type of non-food product, such as footwear products.

[0024] In an exemplary embodiment, the package 10 includes a base 12 and a cover 14 secured to the base. The base 12 includes a bottom support surface 16 and four side walls 18 which collectively define a cavity (not shown in Figure 1) in which a non-food product (e.g., footwear) may be contained at, for example, a point of purchase display. The cover 14 is secured to the base 12 with a known closure member, such as a zipper mechanism 20, which extends along upper edges of three of the side walls 18 and corresponding side edges 22 of the cover 14. A carrying handle 24 is affixed to one of the base side walls 18 for convenient transport of the package 10.

[0025] In an exemplary embodiment, the base 12 and the cover 14 are fabricated from nylon, canvas, cloth, or other suitable material to form a non-rigid or soft sided, yet structurally sufficient package relative to comparatively rigid cardboard and paper materials conventionally used in non-food product packaging, and especially in comparison to known plastic and metallic materials conventionally used in hard-shell case construction. By employing nylon, canvas, cloth, or another non-rigid material to fabricate a soft shell package 10, a lightweight yet very durable package may be provided in a comparatively low cost construction. Additionally, a user friendly zipper mechanism 20 is well suited for a soft sided construction of the package 10. Bulky and difficult to use mechanical closure elements to securely close the cover 14 may therefore be avoided. Alternatively, other known closure members may be employed, including but not limited to Velcro fasteners, snaps, drawstrings, and other closure systems appreciated by those in the art. The package 10 may be liquid impermeable in one embodiment, and the cover 14 may be joined to the base 12 in a liquid impermeable manner to form a seal therebetween.

[0026] Stiffening elements (not shown), such as wire frame elements and the like, may be provided to maintain a desired shape of the cover 14, the base support surface 16, and/or the side walls 18 as desired or as necessary for added strength

and rigidity of the package 10. Graphics and multiple colors may be employed on any of the outer surfaces of the package 10, and the shape of the package 10 may be varied to create distinctly different visual appearances of the package 10.

[0027] In an exemplary embodiment, the carrying handle 24 is fabricated from a nylon, canvas or other pliable material and is stitched to one of the side walls 24 of the base 12. Metallic fastening elements, such as screws, are therefore avoided along with their associated expense and assembly challenges. Like the rest of the package, the handle 24 may include stiffening frame elements to ensure a particular shape of the handle 24, graphics and colors may be employed in the handle 24, and the handle may be fabricated into a variety of shapes in various embodiments to change the visual appearance of the package 10. While the illustrated embodiment of the package 10 includes one handle 24, more than one handle 24 be could provided for transport in more than one orientation when gripped by a user. Alternatively, the handle 24 may be moved to another location on the package 10 for another mode of transport when gripped by a user.

[0028] In an exemplary embodiment, the package includes indicia 26 which in various embodiments may be indicia identifying a source of a non-food item, which may be the same as the non-food item sold in the package 10. Alternatively, the indicia 26 could indicate the source of a food item which may be stored or transported in the package 10 at a later time. The indicia 26 may include brand names, business names, trademarks, logos or other indicia to promote particular products or services. Additionally, the indicia 26 may be unrelated to either the non-food item sold in the package 10 or food-items which may be used therewith, but the indicia may identify, for example, a sports team, a cartoon character, an entertainment event, an entertainment figure or a movie. Thus, package themes and promotion of related and unrelated items and services may be graphically promoted on one or more of the outer surfaces of the package 10, including the top and bottom surfaces, and the side surfaces which connect

the top and the bottom. Graphics and indicia may be transferred printed, or otherwise applied to the package in a known manner.

[0029] Figure 2 is a perspective view of the package 10 with the zipper mechanism 20 (shown in Figure 1) actuated to uncouple the cover 14 from three side walls 18 of the base 12. The cover 14 is hingedly attached to the remaining side wall (i.e., the fourth side wall 18 of the base 12) along a top edge 32 thereof. The cover 14 is rotated about an axis 30 coincident with the top edge 32 in a direction of arrow A to an opened position wherein the cavity 34 of the base 12 is exposed for packaging of a product (not shown in Figure 2) above the bottom support surface 36 of the base 12.

[0030] In an exemplary embodiment, the cover 14 is integrally formed with the rear side wall 18 along the top edge 32, and the cover 14 is folded over the top edge 32 to the closed position shown in Figure 1. The integral folding construction of the cover 14 with one of the side walls 18 is a further benefit of the soft shell or soft sided construction of the package 10. Mechanical fasteners, hinge elements and/or or pivotal mounts are avoided, together with their associated cost, while nonetheless reliably securing the cover 14 to the base 12 and while achieving a hinge action of the cover 14 relative to the base 10. Additionally, as the cover 14 is permanently attached to the base 12 in this construction, the cover 14 may not be inadvertently separated from the base 12, or possibly even lost, when the package 10 is in use.

[0031] The cover 14 is therefore fixedly attached to the base 12 along the top edge 32, while the remaining side walls may be secured to the cover 14 with the zipper mechanism 20 (shown in Figure 1) when the cover 14 is rotated about the axis 30 in the direction of arrow B back to the closed position shown in Figure 1. The cover 14 may therefore be effectively secured to the base 12 along each of the side walls of the base 12 to securely enclose the cavity 34 when a non-food product, such as footwear, is placed therein. Inadvertent exposure or spillage of the product from the base 12 is therefore avoided.

[0032] Figure 3 is a top plan view of the package 10 packed with a non-food product such as footwear 40. In an exemplary embodiment, the footwear 40 is a pair of tennis shoes, although it is appreciated that any type of shoe or footwear for children or adults, or also a non-footwear product, could be employed in another embodiment of the invention. Packing material 42, such as known packing paper 42, is provided around the footwear 40 to protect the footwear 40 and prevent movement of the footwear 40 relative to the base 12 when the package 10 is closed as shown in Figure 1 and carried with the carrying handle 24. Additionally, the packing material 42 facilitates stacking of multiple packages 10 upon one another in for example, a point of purchase display. Other types of packing material familiar to those in the art may be used in lieu of paper packing material in alternative embodiments of the invention.

[0033] It is contemplated that the package 10 could be sold in combination with other items. For example, a toy-related item (e.g., an action figure or doll) could be sold with the toy outside the package 10, while other toy-related items (e.g., action figure or doll accessories) may be packed in the package 10. Thus, the action figure could be prominently featured in a point of purchase display in a separate container which includes the package 10. In such an embodiment, when not in use with the toy-related items, the package 10 could be used as a lunchbox. As another example, the package 10 could be packed with a non-food item (e.g., footwear) and sold with an unrelated item (e.g., a toy) wherein the toy is a prominent feature of the point of purchase presentation and the package 10 is a secondary or ancillary feature of the packaged combination..

[0034] For the reasons described above, the package 10 therefore provides a distinctive appearance and a convenient carrying case for a non-food product such as the footwear 40 in a lightweight, durable, and secure construction. An added benefit of this lightweight, durable and secure construction, however, is that the package 10 may capably serve for stowing or transporting other items, such as food products once the product (e.g. footwear) 40 is unpacked from the package 10.

[0035] By way of example, Figure 4 is a top plan view of the package 10 loaded with food product, and more specifically lunch items. In an illustrative embodiment, and as shown in Figure 4, the lunch items includes as a thermos 50, a wrapped sandwich, a pack of crackers 54, a pack of cookies 56, a banana 58 and an apple 60. It is understood that the lunch items could alternatively include a variety of edible food products, beverage and snack items customary to dietary and eating habits of a particular consumer, as well as condiments, napkins, utensils etc. which ordinarily accompany a prepared lunch meal or snack. The lunch items may be secured in the package 10 with little risk of exposure or spillage of the lunch items from the package, and the zipper mechanism 20 provides easy access to the cavity 34 for packing and unpacking of lunch items.

[0036] The base 12 and the cover 14, in one embodiment, are fabricated from known insulative materials, or other wise include insulative padding or features, which permit the base 12 and cover 14 to function as a cooler when loaded with food or beverage items. Thus, a meal or snack may be maintained in a hot or cold condition for some period of time for convenience by the user.

[0037] Thus, in the foregoing exemplary embodiment, the package 10 may capably serve as a lunchbox for convenient use of footwear purchasers after the footwear is removed therefrom. The zipper mechanism 20 and the soft sided construction of the package 10 make a user friendly package 10 for food products forming school lunches, work lunches, picnics, etc. and when appropriate colors and graphics are included on the package 10, the package 10 may serve as a distinctive and attractive lunchbox for children and adults alike.

[0038] Appropriate modifications, such as dividers, tie down straps, etc, may be provided in the cavity 34 of the lunchbox 10 to make the package 10 more amenable for use as a lunchbox. Additionally, identification tags and other accessories may be provided in further and/or alternative embodiments of the invention, and such

modifications and accessories may be sold at the point of purchase of the non-food product (e.g., footwear), either separately or together with the footwear package 10.

[0039] Figure 5 is a side view of another embodiment of a product package 100 in accordance with an exemplary embodiment of the invention. Similar to the package 10 (shown in Figures 1-4), the package 100 includes a base 12 having a bottom support surface 16 and side walls 18 which define a cavity (not shown in Figure 5) in which a non-food product, including but not limited to footwear, may be accommodated.

[0040] An expandable section 102 is integrated into the bottom support surface 16 of the base 12 and includes side walls 104 which are secured to the bottom surface 16 at one end thereof and a bottom wall 106 connecting the side walls 104. The expandable section 102 may be fabricated from nylon, canvas, cloth, or other suitable material familiar to those in the art. A handle element 106 (shown in phantom in Figure 5) may be provided on the expandable section 106 to provide a carrying position when the expandable section 102 is expanded from the bottom wall. When not in use, the expandable section may be folded, arranged, or otherwise tucked into the bottom supporting surface 16 of the base 12 in a known manner. When not expanded, the expandable section 102 is substantially transparent, or not visible, to the casual observer and the package 100 looks substantially similar to the package 10 as illustrated in Figures 1 and 2.

[0041] Access to the expandable section may be provided through the bottom support surface 16 of the base, the side walls 104 or the bottom wall 106 in a known manner such as, for example, with a zipper mechanism, Velcro straps and the like as those in the art may appreciate. The expandable section 102 defines an enlarged cavity between the side walls 104 and the bottom wall 106 for stowage and transport of additional items. For example, in one contemplated embodiment, the expandable section 102 is extendible from the base 12 to convert the base 12 into a duffel bag.

[0042] In a duffel bag configuration, the expandable section 102 may accommodate a work-out suit, a towel and small toiletries to be stowed and transported by a user, in addition to a food-product or a non-food product as explained above. As such, aside from product packaging, the package 100 may be used as a lunchbox on certain days and as a workout bag on other days, or a combination lunchbox/duffel bag. For example, footwear originally contained in the package 100, and/or other non-food items may be packed into the expandable section 102 and food-items packed in the base 12 of the package 100 as described above. As another example, the expandable section 102 may include a swimsuit, a towel, suntan lotion, etc., and the base 12 may be used as a lunchbox for a pleasurable afternoon excursion to the beach or to the pool.

[0043] In a further embodiment, the expandable section 102 may be fabricated from an insulative material or materials and serve as an expanded capacity cooler for hiking, camping, boating, or other outdoor activities.

[0044] In still other embodiments, the expandable section 102 may be configured as a shopping bag which may include other purchase items in a retail environment. Thus, for example, if a consumer wishes to purchase a pair of shoes and a shirt, the shirt could be placed in the expandable section 102 during checkout and the consumer could exit the store with the package 100 including both the shoes and the shirt. Graphics may be printed or otherwise placed on the packaging with names, logos, trademarks or other indicia of interest for either the product purchased or the retailer from whom it was purchased.

[0045] While several example configurations have been discussed for the expandable section 102, it is noted that these are intended only as examples. Other configurations are possible which are encompassed by the scope and spirit of the present invention.

[0046] Distinctive dual-use product packages 10 and 100 are therefore provided in a lightweight, totable form. After the non-food product (e.g., footwear) is

unpacked, the durable package 10 or 100 is suitable for everyday use, such as a lunchbox for storing and transporting food products, a duffel bag for carrying other items in addition to food products, or other purposes which complement the non-food product sold in the package. For example, golf shoes could be sold in the package 100 wherein the expandable section is configured to hold golf balls, tees, scorecards, etc. Hiking boots could be sold in a package with an expandable section configured to hold hiking gear. Baseball cleats could be sold in such packages with the expandable section configured to hold a baseball glove, a batting glove and a baseball. Such complementary products could be sold together with the applicable footwear product, or purchased separately by consumers as desired. Countless other products may be sold in such packages 10 or 100 with a variety of products, included but not limited to footwear products.

[0047] Waste is therefore avoided with innovative product packaging which may be desirably used for other purposes use once the product is unpacked, such as in the lunchbox example. The foregoing product packages may further complement the use and enjoyability of the product by stowing and toting the product along with other complementary items needed for an activity which entails use of the product, such as the foregoing footwear examples.

[0048] Optionally, the base 12 and/or cover 14 may be constructed of a rigid material (e.g., metal or plastic) and the cover 14 may be entirely removable from the base 12. Moreover, the cover 14 may be secured to the base 12 by a fastener other than a zipper, including but not limited to Velcro fasteners, snap-on sealed interfaces, snaps, and the like. The cover 14 may be attached to the base 12 at one point via, for example, a nylon or plastic strap, or a mechanical hinge, such as a metal hinge element.

[0049] The packages 10 and 100 lend themselves to innovative branding, selling and promotion for wide variety of products and services for mass appeal to different groups of consumers. An exemplary method for selling a non-food item in combination with a dual-use container includes providing a dual-use container (e.g., the

containers 10 or 100 described above) having a storage cavity configured to hold separately a non-food item and a food item one at a time. A non-food item (e.g., clothing, footwear, a toy-related item, a sports-related item, a book, a magazine, a game-related item, an entertainment-related item, or an infant care-related item) is packed in the cavity, for example, by closing the aforementioned zipper connecting the cover and a base of the dual-use container, and the dual-use container is presented in combination with the non-food item packed therein at a point of purchase. For the reasons explained above, the dual-use container is configured to be reusable such that a purchaser of the dual use container in combination with the non-food item is able to remove the non-food item without damaging or destroying the dual-use container and repack the dual-use container with a food item. The food-item may constitute an edible food item, a beverage, a beverage holder, utensils, plates, flatware, napkins, condiments, a food warmer, a cooling block, etc.

[0050] By providing indicia on the dual use container, commercial sources of a non-food item and/or a food item may be indicated. Additionally, indicia provided on the dual use container may identify, for example a sports team, a cartoon character, entertainment event, entertainment figure or a movie, wherein said branding indicia is not indicative of a source of the non-food item.

[0051] While the invention has been described in terms of various specific embodiments, those skilled in the art will recognize that the invention can be practiced with modification within the spirit and scope of the claims.